

## SIMPLIFIED SPELLING: A LETTER TO TEACHERS

We address this letter to teachers in the hope that many who have hitherto taken little or no interest in the spelling question, except to try to spell by 'the dictionary' and teach the young to do likewise, may be led to study the subject as an educational problem—a problem which involves the interests of all the countless millions of children who are hereafter to learn our written language.

But what is the spelling question? In its entirety it is a large and rather difficult subject, presenting many phases for consideration. Some of these we have discussed in previous publications, which may be had by those who desire them. We wish that every teacher in the United States would investigate the spelling question for himself; would read what has been said by the ablest writers, both for and against what is commonly called spelling reform, and make up his own mind. We will do our best to aid the searcher after knowledge. The one thing to be deprecated is the 'snap judgment', formed without any study or reflection. That is not making up one's mind.

In this letter we take up a phase of the subject which ought to be of special interest to teachers. The question is this: To what extent, and in what way, may improved spellings, such as are plainly in the right direction and are recommended by the best authority, but have not yet come into general use, be taught to children in the elementary schools?

This is a very different question from that which confronts the adult, when it is suggested that he change his own fixed habits. There are many intelligent persons whose general position with regard to spelling reform may be stated as follows:

For better or worse (they say) I learned to spell in my childhood, and I do not intend to learn again. Spelling is with me in the main an automatic process, and I wish it to remain so. When I am writing I do not wish to stop and think about the spelling of words, still less to consult a list of improved spellings, even if my intellect tells me that the new forms are really better than those to which I am accustomed. The attempt to change habits that have become fixed by long use, and to some extent endeared by association, bad though some of the habits may be, would cause me much

annoyance and vexation of spirit, for which the very little good that I could do by my personal example would be but a poor compensation. Therefore I decline to change my habits.

Now this is a reasonable position. So far as the individual adult and his short life are concerned, there is nothing very cogent to be said on the other side. We would merely remind educated men and women that, in dealing with our linguistic inheritance, we have a twofold duty: first, to follow *good* usage; second, to assist in bettering bad usage, including our own. The second duty is no less important than the first. At the very least it calls for a tolerant frame of mind with regard to sensible changes which may happen to 'look odd' to our unwonted eye, or to run counter to our own habits and prejudices.

Suppose, then, that one's general attitude with regard to what is called spelling reform be that described in the last paragraph but one: does it follow that a person thus minded must be an enemy of all change in spelling? Must he look on the subject with indifference or contempt? In particular, shall he insist, because *he* has acquired certain habits that are endeared to him by use and association, that therefore those same habits, the bad along with the good, shall be forced on school-children for ever and ever? We do not think that this follows. On the contrary, we hold that every one who uses the English language, and is accustomed to think in a large way and from an evolutionary point of view, ought to wish that our spelling may be improved wherever it is bad. More especially, the teacher ought to be in favor of any movement which looks toward lightening in some degree the burden that is now laid on children by the necessity of memorizing a mass of cumbrous and irrational spellings which could easily be made fairly good, if it were not for the prejudice, the excessive conservatism, and the sheer mental inertia of us adults. There is room for a vast army of moderate reformers who may not care to change their own fixed habits to any great extent, but who clearly recognize the fact that, for the sake of all who are to come, our spelling ought to be modified at many points in the direction of simplicity and rationality; and that the place to begin the improvement is in the elementary school.

The progressive improvement of our spelling rests on precisely the same intellectual basis as the progressive improvement of our roads, laws, schools, transportation, medical practice, or any other social utility. The desire to promote the general good is the highest motive known to the modern man. We may differ in our estimate, or in our vision, of what the general good requires,



which means that there will always be room for conflicting opinions, parties, creeds and movements; but when it is once clearly made out that a particular change in our present way of doing things will make for the general good in time to come, we have, in the desire to bring about that change, a motiv of the highest dignity and cogency. Let us call that motiv—which in our day more and more dominates the lives of the men and women who are doing the world's work—the social reason.

The social reason, then, is the highest and weightiest of all considerations. It is that which should determin our attitude toward the improvement of our spelling, just as it determins our attitude toward the improvement of our laws, our politics, or our public highways. It does not require that every one be an activ propagandist—there are so many good things to be done that every one must be left free to choose where he will put in his own work—but it does require that we recognize the need of improvement, where the need exists, and that we exert our personal influence, be it small or great, in favor of rational betterment. To treat spelling reform merely as a subject for cheap humor (as some newspaper writers do) is the mark of a small and inert mind. It is quite of a piece with making fun out of any other effort—social, political, educational, religious—which looks toward the general good in the long time to come. One may very properly oppose particular changes for particular reasons; but to take an attitude of stolid opposition to *all* change, merely because it *is* change and because it results in something that looks odd at first,—this is simply to go against civilization. It is to dethrone the intellect and range oneself with the lower animals.

And yet there are many otherwise estimable people who unwittingly take that very position, because they persistently refuse to *think* about spelling. They may think they think about it, but in truth they merely experience certain nervous reactions, without letting the intellect come into play. We need a distinctiv name for this class of our opponents, and it must be a dignified and inopprobrious name, because they are in the main such excellent people. We will call them the Brahmins, that being the name of the highest Hindu caste, which considers itself, and to a great extent really is, the special custodian of all the higher Hindu culture. The Brahmins, then,—cultured folk who pride themselves on their fine literary taste—oppose *all* change in spelling. Their supreme rule is let-alone. They may sometimes admit ruefully that spelling will surely change in spite of them as time passes, but for themselves they resist it. And when askt

for the reason of their opposition they put it on grounds of literary taste. They say: Your so-called improvements in spelling offend my esthetic sense. They look odd, uncouth, deformed, monstrous. They disturb familiar associations and make noble words appear vulgar. They seem illiterate; they suggest 'Josh Billings', or the street urchin.

By all this the Brahmin evidently means that, in deciding how words should be spelt, there is for him a higher criterion than the social reason, namely, the sense of beauty: more specifically, *his* sense of beauty. That the feeling which he deems so important exists, and is very strong, no one can deny; indeed, its reality and its strength constitute the one serious obstacle to the speedy rationalization of our spelling. Let us then inquire, very carefully, whether this feeling really is a higher criterion than the social reason. What is the peculiar beauty or dignity which we feel in certain word-forms, and which we miss if the forms are changed? Is it something that resides in the word, independent of the seeing eye and its training? Has any supreme authority ever decided that one letter or combination of letters is intrinsically more beautiful than another? Is *a* more dignified than *o*, or *bc* than *xy*? Is there any mysterious efficacy in the letters *ugh* to improve the appearance of a word? No doubt, many people *feel* that there is in the case of *though*, but if the same 'beauty-element' were to be added to *go* or *so* the same people would feel the effect as preposterous. Two of the finest words in our language, so far as associations are concerned, are *duty* and *beauty*. Clearly they should be spelt with a difference in the first letter only. But if we write the latter as *buty* it seems to lose caste, to become illiterate and vulgar. Is this because there is something intrinsically fine in the combination *eau* as a means of denoting the sound otherwise denoted by *u*? If so, why not add to the majesty and dignity of *duty* by spelling it *deauty*?

To ask such questions is to answer them. There is no such thing as a beautiful word. The literary dignity, or propriety, which we feel in certain word-forms is entirely a matter of visual habit and mental association. It is in *us*, not in the words. The child learns to spell a word in a certain way; if then he always sees it spelt in that way, the meaning of the word, be it high or low, grave or gay, becomes gradually associated with the form to which his eye is accustomed. And this happens just the same whether the form was good or bad. The form is not the word, any more than the clothes are the man; but just as we learn to



connect a man's character with his appearance, if his appearance is always the same, so in the case of words. With the lapse of time this visual habit becomes very imperious: we learn to take pride in our habits, bad tho they may have been from the beginning; to feel that they are a part of nature's order, and to resent whatever disturbs them. But the shock of displeasure that we feel has nothing to do with the intellect. It is simply a nervous reaction which we share with the lower animals; for they also feel and express displeasure when they see something strange to their habitual experience. A horse will shy at an unfamiliar object in the road, a dog will bark at a stranger, a cow will stare at a new gate; yet the gate may be a much needed improvement, and the stranger may be a better man than the master whom the dog expected to greet. We are all creatures of habit; but intelligence ought to prevail more and more. To put habit before intelligence, and to suppose that a nervous reaction against the unfamiliar affords a higher criterion than the social reason, is to err radically in one's thinking.

But an objector may perhaps say: Granted that my feeling for the beauty and dignity of words may have originated in the way you describe, still it is very real, very precious: why then should I be cald on to sacrifice it for a vague general good which I, at any rate, shall never harvest, and in which I only half believe? This objection must be fairly met, for it goes to the root of the whole matter. Let it then be candidly admitted that the improvement of our bad spelling is not imperatively demanded as a mesure of comfort and convenience for adults who have learnd to spell. It *is* imperatively demanded as a duty that we owe to coming generations. It is like laying out a town, or planting trees, or conserving our material resources, or doing any other social act which looks not so much to an immediate return as to the general good in time to come. As such, the cause demands of us not only careful thought, but a certain mesure of idealism, even of self-sacrifice. All thoughtful persons admit the reasonableness of this demand as applied to the other utilities just mentiond: is there any less need of forethought and self-subordination in dealing with a matter of such immense importance and such universal interest as the visible form of our language?

The self-sacrifice that is demanded of the general public is simply a little relaxation of the grip of certain illusions and prejudices that stand in the way of rational progress. This is not easy, for an illusion of culture is harder to give up than money or life; but we ought to be willing to bear our share in the

growing-pains of a better day. People need to find out that spelling is not of necessity a deep and dark mystery that is so because it *is* so, and must be blindly and helplessly accepted, no matter how irrational it may be; but something that can be reasond about and improved where it is bad. They need to get rid of the curious notion that loyalty to the past—to “our noble English language”—involvs the unquestioning acceptance of each and every bad spelling which our forefathers, perhaps by accident or by sheer blundering, fell into the habit of using. It needs to be recognized that real culture, here as elsewhere, consists not in a blind clinging to habit and prejudis, but in a free play of intelligence under the impulse of the social reason. We ought to remember that any new spelling will of course look odd to the unaccustomd eye, and that therefore its seeming oddity can not be the right criterion for judging it. Where is the room for improvement if we virtually adopt the rule that educated folk shall frown on every new spelling until it has come into general use?

We need to become more hospitable toward new spellings, however odd they may look, which are in the direction of simplicity and rationality; for these are everlasting criterions. The teachers we occasionally hear of, who ‘mark down’ their pupils for ‘mis-spelling’ because they spell in accordance with the recommendations of the Simplified Spelling Board, need to free their minds from the tyranny of routine. They should be able to distinguish between the adoption of a better spelling which is recommended by the highest living authorities, and a mis-spelling due to carelessness or ignorance; to see that, in spelling as in other matters, routine is not the sole or the highest criterion of merit. They should remember that the progress of civilization consists largely in the replacement of bad habits by those that are better. They should never forget that it is a very great misfortune that the simple, obvious and natural spelling of an English word, in accordance with the prevailing rules and analogies of the language, should ever, by the accident of time and chance, have come to be associated with the idea of illiteracy. The child who spells *tung*, after the pattern of *bung*, *hung*, *lung*, *sung*, *flung*, is really wiser and more sensible than his sophisticated elders, who spell it *tongue* for no better reason than that the misguided pedantry of the sixteenth century made a mistake. We smile at the child, but the gods smile at us.

In particular, it needs to be borne in mind by teachers that our feeling for the beauty, or dignity, or propriety, of words is something that develops and dies with the individual. It is *not*



*transmitted from generation to generation.* So far as the meaning of words is concern'd—their 'meaning' includes all their associations—the mind of the child is a blank tablet on which we can write what we will. If we teach children to spell certain words in a better way than we ourselves learn'd when we were young, we do not sacrifice any precious associations; we merely provide a better symbol for the associations to cluster about. Is it not time to begin familiarizing children with the idea that they *can* and *may* spell words—certain words, that is to say,—in a simple and natural way; and that this is really the better way, tho it may not be fashionable?

There are some who see that much of our spelling is needlessly bad, and who would like to have it made better, yet take no interest in the efforts of the Simplified Spelling Board, because, as they say, we do not go fast and far enough. They want sweeping changes, or they want a new alphabet; and until they get everything, they think it not worth while to do anything at all. But no one reasons in that way about anything else than spelling. A perfect system of public highways is desirable: but no one is going to wait for that before removing a stump or a stone from the road in front of his house. Bit-by-bit progress is the law of civilization, and little improvements ought never to be despised. There is need of a reformation and enlargement of our alphabet; but it will take a long time to bring this about, even after the public has become more hospitable to the idea than it is now. Meanwhile there is much that we can do to put our house in order without changing its plan or bilding any additions. It is a fine old mansion which is going to last for centuries, and to be occupied all the time. But it is out of repair in places, some of the arrangements are antiquated, and there is rubbish about. Is it not the part of plain common sense and public duty to put the place in order as best we can now, and so to hand it on to the next generation in a little better condition than it was when we moved into it? This is what our fathers did for us. Should we not do it for our children?

The alternativ is to let the accumulated rubbish and the antiquated arrangements remain as they are, and *compel* our children and our children's children to accept all these things, not only for use but also as a part of the beauty of the place. Is not that a little absurd? And yet that is just what some of the Brahmins recommend. They say that the language has 'done very well' hitherto, without any organized effort to improve its spelling; therefore, they ask, why not let it alone?

The answer to that is that the language has never 'done' anything of itself. Wherever we have got a better spelling than our forefathers had—and there are hundreds and hundreds of such cases—it is due to the efforts of spelling reformers. Some one took the lead, showed the better way, and in time everybody followed. The history of these successive efforts is not generally known, but it is accessible to those who make research. The notion that the language tends to improve itself without the active efforts of those who use it is a curious illusion. It is just like supposing that the roads or the laws will improve themselves, even if nobody does anything about it. In former times our forefathers asserted considerable freedom to spell according to their best lights. Sometimes their light was darkness, and their efforts at reform made matters worse instead of better; but sometimes their efforts were wisely guided, and we now have the benefit. The important fact is that real improvements once had at least a chance to get themselves considered and accepted. But for the past century and a half we have lived under the tyranny of 'the dictionary'—not a modern dictionary prepared in the full light of the latest scientific knowledge, but an old dictionary which recorded without system the more or less hap-hazard usage of printers. This is not creditable to our intelligence. The consequence is that no one not yet emancipated from literary superstitions dares to adopt a new spelling, however sensible it may be, for fear of incurring the awful odium of illiteracy. Thus, while progress has never been entirely arrested, it has been much slower than it should be. In this fact lies the abundant justification of the organized effort now being made.

Let us see how the new despotism works in a particular case, which is representative of many. We write the word *guard* with a useless *u*. There is no reason for the *u*, except that we have got into the habit of writing it. Here there is no question of literary beauty, or dignity, or fine associations, for there is *regard*, without the *u*. It is as plain as day that the *u* in *guard* should come out. But how are we going to get rid of it? The adult who has once learned to write *guard*, has no need to change his habit. The *u* writes itself, so to speak, no less than the *g* or the *d*. If he wishes to leave it out he must actually 'stop and think', in other words, must make an effort, small though it be. If he writes *gard*, say in a letter, he fears that the reader of the letter will set him down as a 'poor speller.' He does not like to incur that petty odium, especially in writing to a stranger. If he writes



*gard* in a manuscript for the printer, the editor or proof-reader will insert the *u*. The proof-reader is ordinarily a person whose whole wisdom, in the field of spelling, consists in following his offis card or the prescribed offis dictionary. He *dares* not do otherwise; if he did he would become, from the offis point of view, a poor proof-reader, and would lose his position. As for the editor, he probably does not know anything about spelling either; in which case he will be violently opposed to what he calls "deforming the English language." If he does know something about spelling—as many editors now do—and would really like to put in a stroke now and then for plain common sense, he may expect that if he prints *gard*, some readers will write to him in more or less angry protest, whereas, if he prints *guard*, no one will say anything. Is it strange that he generally follows the line of least resistance? What chance is there, under such conditions, for even the plainest common sense to make hedway? Drive a flock of sheep thru a gap in which there is a rail a foot from the ground: the leaders will leap over the gap. Pull out the rail, and the followers will long continue to make the useless jump. Are we sheep?

The thing to do is to teach the children that they *may* spell *gard* without the *u*, just as they spell *card*, *hard* and *lard*; and that to do so is *right*, tho not yet fashionable. They will then grow up without any illusions about that superfluous *u*. It will be as natural for them to leave it out as it is for us to put it in, and *guard* will look as odd to them as *musick* and *traffick* do to us. Does any one say that this is a small matter, hardly worth bothering about? It certainly is a small matter whether any one living adult clings to *guard*. or changes to *gard*. Let him do as he chooses. Still, one can see that, tho we are unconscious of it, there really is some small effort, some minute expenditure of energy, involvd in writing the useless *u*. If we left it out there would be a slight saving of time, space and work. For us adults that saving would be offset, for a short time and to some extent, by the bother of changing fixt habits. Not so, however, with young children, who have formd no fixt habits. For the unborn billions the saving will be clear gain without any drawbacks, just as it is clear gain for us that we can now write *fish* and *ship* in sted of the older *fysse* and *shippe*. Consider the illimitable future; multiply the slight saving by a virtual infinity, and the product becomes rather impressiv. The people who despise small things in the improvement of spelling lack imagination. They forget the infinit multiplier.

But the saving of time and labor to our posterity is not the only gain that would be made if we were to adopt the idea of teaching the school-children, and under proper guidance, to spell certain words in a better way than we ourselves have learned. There would be an immense educational gain. At present the school drill in spelling is probably the dullest and driest part of the work which the elementary teacher has to do. This is because it is so largely a matter of mechanical memorizing, without play for the intelligence. The teacher feels in advance, and the pupil soon comes to feel, that spelling does not go by rule, or logic, or common sense, but is so because it *is* so. Why is there one *f* in *if*, but two in *stiff*? Why one *g* in *leg* and *beg*, but two in *egg*? Why must I put a *b* in *doubt*, but not in *out* or *shout*? Why must I attach a *b* to *lamb* and *thumb*, but not to *ham* or *chum*? What's the use of an *s* in *island*? The child who asks such questions as these gets no comfort. And yet he *ought* to ask them, and a great many more like them, and to receive a rational answer. It is a great misfortune, as many an educator has pointed out, that, just when the child is beginning to reason by analogy, we repress the questioning spirit, which ought to be encouraged and developed, and deluge him with irrationality. Must it always be so to the latest generation? Can we not do better?

It is sometimes said by the opponents of orthographic progress that children learn our chaotic spelling when they are very young and could not use their time to better advantage, and that they are not conscious of hardship in so doing. With this idea, surely, the modern teacher can have little patience. If the new educational science has taught us anything it is respect for childhood. In the whole life of a man or woman there are no years more precious than those of childhood, none in which the wise use of time, the wise direction of energy, is more important. The idea that it makes no difference what children work at, so long as they are occupied; that there is nothing better for them to do than to struggle with the intricacies of a chaotic orthography, which we force upon them because it was forced upon us,—this idea is barbarous.

There is need of a graduated series of word-lists for use in the elementary schools. They should comprize words that are of common occurrence. The first list, or primer of simplified spelling, would consist of words to which no one could object; words, namely, of which a simplified form has already come into extensive use in books and journals. Examples are *honor*, *program*, *catalog*, *draft*, *plow*, *hiccup*, *tho*, *dropt*, *gage*, etc. This list could be made the basis of elementary teaching about the nature of



spelling, the authority of usage, how changes come about, what sort of changes are desirable, etc. The second list would consist of words that are not yet in use (except maybe in the literature of spelling reform), but are in very evident need of a perfectly obvious simplification, such as would be clear to the mind of any child, would involve no dubious consequences, and could not be objected to except by those who object to any change whatsoever. Examples are *gard, tung, harang, lam, thum, lim, det, dout, furlo, bild, gost, gastly, siv, eg, brest, brekfast*, etc. A third list would take up words the proper simplification of which is not perfectly obvious to the untrained eye, but calls for some linguistic scholarship; such as *fantom, alfabet, medieval, traveler*, etc. Later lists would deal with the more difficult cases.

The Simplified Spelling Board will undertake to prepare such lists, as soon as teachers and school authorities indicate a desire for them.

We assume, now, that any teacher who has been in the least degree impressed by the foregoing considerations will be disposed to ask the question: What can I personally do to promote the cause? In reply we make the following definite suggestions:

First, you can join the army of adherents, by signing the card of agreement. The agreement has been drawn up in the most liberal spirit, for the purpose of bringing together on a common platform all those who recognize the importance of improving our spelling, and are willing to help in any way whatever. It is something merely to stand up and be counted. We want the name of every person who believes in orthographic progress, directed by scientific knowledge. Do not imagine that the agreement obligates you to use, or even to approve, each and every simplified spelling which the Board has hitherto recommended. You reserve the right to reject any specific change which you disapprove. Unanimity is always impossible, and in intellectual matters it is not even desirable. One may assent, or dissent, or move to amend. The main thing is to *think*. To think is your duty; the rest is your privilege.

Second, you can make for yourself a careful study of spelling, considered as an intellectual and educational problem. For that purpose the matter of practice may be left, at first, quite in abeyance. The publications of the Simplified Spelling Board, which may be had free on application, contain much valuable information about English spelling not known to persons whose knowledge is confined to the spelling-books or the newspapers. Any teacher may learn all that is essential to understanding.

One can at least understand, even if he does not act upon his knowledge. And the subject of spelling is in itself interesting and profitable, opening many vistas of philologic, historic and literary lore.

Third, bearing these things in mind, look squarely at the English spellings which you are required to teach, and decide for yourself whether the forms are in themselves satisfactory to *you*, and whether they accord with any reasonable rule or analogy. Ask yourself whether you are intellectually satisfied with these forms and with the prospect of teaching and using such forms so long as you shall live. Ask yourself, further, whether you are intellectually and morally satisfied with the fate of the millions of children who are to be required to learn these forms, or to attempt to learn them, for all future time. If you are not satisfied with this prospect, ask yourself what you can do to alter it.

Fourth, having mastered the pros and cons of the argument, and made up your mind, you can help by informing others. You can make opportunities for discussion in conversation, in teachers' meetings, in debating societies, in literary clubs. You can write to the newspapers. You can in these and other ways make yourself a recognized center of information on the whole subject.

Fifth, you can exert a beneficial influence on apathetic or dubitating school authorities, by supplying information and documents, which the Simplified Spelling Board will furnish.

Sixth, you can, now and always, give preference, in your teaching, to the simpler forms recognized in any accepted dictionary. You can, yourself, recognize that many other simpler forms are now not only approved, but expressly recommended by the best scholars and educators. You can allow your pupils a reasonable freedom in the use of spellings thus selected out of varying usage and scholarly sanction. You can teach them that spelling is a convenience to be used, and not an idol to be worshipt. If you doubt your right to teach, or even to permit, simpler spellings, ask who there is to forbid; and inquire what right others have, what law there is, to compel you to teach only the *worse* spellings. And if custom requires the worse spellings today, can you not start the custom of using the better spellings tomorrow?

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